



ELISSA

THE DOOM OF ZIMBABWE

BY H. RIDER HAGGARD

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CHAPTER XVI.

THE CAGE OF DEATH.

An hour later the attack commenced at the chosen points of the double wall, one of them being the southern gate. In front of the advancing columns were driven vast numbers of slaves, most of whom had been captured, or had surrendered in the outer town. These men were laden with faggots to fill the ditch, rude ladders, wherewith to scale the walls, and heavy trunks of stores, to be used in breaching them. For the most part, they were unarmed, and protected only by their burdens, which they held before them as shields. And the arrows of the warriors of Ithobal, but these did little harm to the defenders, who were hidden behind the walls, whence their shafts rained on them from above, killed or wounded the slaves by scores, and when they turned to fly, they were driven onward by the spear points of the savages, to scale the walls, and then to die. Still, some of them lived, and, running under the shelter of the wall, began to breach it with the ladders, and to raise the scaling ladders till death found them, or they were worn out with excitement. Then the real attack began. With fierce yells the threefold column rushed at the wall, and began to work the ramps

the shock of the blow; but very soon he was up and crying his commands from behind the shield hedge of his captains.

"Let the Prince Azel and the Jews with him be taken alive and brought to me," he shouted. "I will give a great reward in cattle to those who capture them unharmed, but if any do them hurt, they themselves shall be put to death."

The captains bowed and issued their orders, and presently Azel and his companions saw lines of unarmored men creeping up ladders set upon every side of the lofty tower. Again and again they cast off the ladders till at length, being so few, they could stir them no more because of the weight upon them, but must hack at the heads of the stormers as they appeared above the parapet, killing them one by one. In this fashion they slew many, but their arms grew weary at last, and ever under the eye of their king the brave savages crept upward, heedless of death, till with a shout, they poured over the battlements and rushed at the little band of Jews. Now, rather than be taken, Azel sought to throw himself from the tower, but his companions held him, and thus last it came about that he was seized and bound. As they dragged him to the stairway, he looked across the fosse and saw the mercenaries lying from the inner wall

And all this she does for the love of you, Azel; for the love of you she refuses to become my queen, ruling over that city which I have conquered and all my unnumbered tribes. Do you guess now why I caused you to be taken living? I will tell you; that you may be the bait to draw her to me. To kill you would be easy; but how would that serve, seeing that then she herself would choose to die? But, perchance, to save your life, she will live also, and give herself to me. At least I will try it; should it fail—then you can pay the price of her pride with your blood, Prince Azel."

"That I would do gladly," answered Azel; "but, oh, what a wound you are who thus can seek to torture the heart of a helpless woman! Have you, then, no manhood that you can stoop to such a plot?"

"It is because of my manhood that I stoop to it," said Ithobal, angrily. "Doubtless you think that a foolish fancy and naught else drives me to the deed, but it is not so, although in truth my heart chooses this woman to be my wife and none other. That fondness I might conquer, but look you, of all things living this lady alone has dared to cross my will, so that today even the savage women in the kraals tell each other of how Ithobal, the great king, has been baffled by a girl who despises him because his blood is not

shippers and cowards. Have you tidings of the Lady Elissa?"

"Yes, prince, she still sits yonder in the tomb, resolute in her purpose, and waiting to answer to those who come to reason with her."

As he spoke the guard fell full from the front of the tent, so that the sunlight flowed into it, revealing Azel and his twelve companions, each fast in his narrow prison. "See," said Metem, "do you know the place?"

The Prince rose to his knees and saw that they were set upon the top of a hill built up of granite boulders, rising 80 feet or more from the surface of the plain. Opposite to them, at a distance of about 100 paces, rose a precipice, in the face of which could be seen a cave closed with barred gates of bronze, while between the rocky hill and the precipice ran a road.

"I know it," he said. "There runs the path by which we traveled from the coast, and there is the tomb of Baaltis. Why have we been brought here?"

"The Lady Elissa, sits behind the bars of yonder tomb, whence her view of all that happens upon this mount must be a good indeed," answered Metem, with a sneer. "Can you guess why we were brought here, Prince Azel?"

Is it that she may witness our sufferings under this torment?" he asked.

Metem nodded.

"How will they deal with us, Metem?"

"Wait and see," he answered.

As he spoke Ithobal himself appeared, followed by certain evil-looking savages, and having greeted Metem courteously, he turned to the Hebrew soldiers in the paces, and asked them which of their number was most prepared to die.

"I, Ithobal, who am their leader," said Azel, stepping forward.

"No, Prince," replied Ithobal, with a cruel smile. "Your time is not yet. Look, there is a man who has been chosen to put him out of his pain, and he is a kindred slave, bear that Jew to the edge of the rock, and as the Prince will wish to study a new mode of death, bring his cage also."

The order was obeyed, Azel being set down upon the very verge of the cliff. Close to him a spur of granite jutted out 20 feet or so from its edge. At the end of the spur of granite a groove was cut, and over this groove, suspended by a thin chain from a pole, hung a wedge of pure crystal, carefully shaped and polished. While Azel stood, the slaves had fastened a fine rope to the cage containing the wounded Hebrew soldier, and secured its end to the rock in the groove of the granite spur, and pushed the cage over the edge of the cliff, so that it dangled in midair.

"Now, I will explain," said Ithobal. "This is a mode of death that I have borrowed from those followers of Baal who worship the sun, by means of which Baal claims his own sacrifice, and none are guiltier of this than you, Azel. You see yonder crystal—well, at any appointed hour, for it can be hung as you will, the rays of the sun shining through it, cause a beam of fire to fall upon the man in the cage, and he is roasted and smoldered, till at length they part, and—Baal takes the sacrifice. Should a cloud hide the sun at the appointed hour, then Baal, having spared the victim, is set free. But, as you will note, at this season of the year there are no clouds. What, Prince, have you nothing to say?" For Azel had listened in silence to the tale of this devilish device.

"Well, learn that it depends upon the Lady Elissa whether or no this tale shall be yours. Send power and pray to save you from it. This was yours, will be to hang as your servant does over the yawning gulf of space, waiting through the long hours till at last you see the little beam of fire, and you will curl from the tinder of the cord. Why, before the end found them, I have known men go mad and tear with their teeth at the wooden bars like wild beasts. You will not? Then, Metem, do you plead for your friend. Bid the Lady Baaltis look forth today at one hour before the noon and see the sight of yonder man, and she will be free, for tomorrow that fate shall be her lover's unless she foregoes her purpose of self-murder and gives herself to me. Nay, no words, an escort shall lead you through the lower city to the gateway of the tomb and listen to your speech there. See that it does not fail you, merchant, unless you also seek to hang in yonder cage. Tell the Lady Elissa that tomorrow at sunrise I will come in person for her answer. If she yields, then the prince and his companions shall be set free, and by you, Metem, to guide them, be mounted on swift camels to carry them, unharmed, to their refuge beyond the mountains; but if she will not yield, then—Baal shall take his sacrifice."

Having no choice, Metem bowed and went, leaving the caged Azel upon the edge of the cliff and the Hebrew soldier hanging from the spur of the rock. Now Azel roused himself from the horror in which his soul was sunk, and strove to comfort his comrade, praying with him to heaven. Slowly the hours at the still all at length, upon the opposite cliff, he saw figures whom he knew to be Metem and his escort approach the mouth of the tomb, and heard him call through the bars of the gateway. Turning, he glanced at the rope, and watched the spot of light born of the crystal creep to its side. Next he saw a little beam of smoke rise in the still air, and he knew that the sun was shining, and that the man who had been chosen to die, was now being roasted. Then came the cry, for suddenly the taut rope, eaten through, flew back, and the cage with the man in it, fell into the fosse below. A heavy fall, and from the tomb of Baaltis, the echo of a woman's shriek.

CHAPTER XVII.

THERE IS HOPE.

It was dawn, and Ithobal, the king, stood with one of the tomb of Baaltis, the gray light glimmering faintly on his harness, and knocked upon the brazen bars with the handle of his sword.

"Who troubles me now?" said a voice within.

"Lady, it is I, Ithobal, who, as I promised by Metem, the Phoenician, am come to learn your will as to the fate of Prince Azel. Already he hangs above the gulf, and within one short hour, if you so decree it, he will be set free to return to his own land."

"At what price will he be set free, King Ithobal?"

"Lady, you know the price; it is your self. Oh, I beseech you, be wise and spare his life and your own. Listen, spare his life, and I will set him free, this city, which lies in the hollow of my hand, and you shall rule it with me."

"You cannot bribe me thus, King Ithobal. My word, which I have sworn, is dead, and shall give myself to you for the sake of a city that would have betrayed me into your hands."

"Nay, but for the sake of the man whom you love you shall do even this, Elissa. Think, if you do not, his blood will be upon your head, and what will you have gained?"

"Death, which is dear to me, for I weary of this life, and I could not stand this fancy will escape your mind, and you will remain one of the mightiest queens of men."

Metem returned no answer, and for awhile there was silence.

"Lady," said Ithobal, at length, "the sun rises, and my servants yonder stand, and I have given you your choice. Now, then, speak, like one who hesitates."

"Are you not afraid, King Ithobal, to trust your life to a woman known in such a fashion?"

"Nay," answered Ithobal, "for though you say that fate concerns you not, the lives of all the Phoenicians upon the coast are hostages of my own. Should you by chance find a means to stab me unawares, then tonight fire and sword would rage through the city of Zimbabwe, and I should be a corpse. I know, therefore, well that you who think you hate me now, very soon will learn to love me."

"You promise, King Ithobal, that if I spare his life, you will set him free, and I will give him to you? How can I believe you who twice has tried to murder him?"

"Doubt me if you will, lady. At least, you cannot doubt your own eyes. Look, his road runs beneath this rock. Come from the tomb and take your stand upon it, and you shall see him pass; yes, and should you wish to speak with him in farewell, that you may be sure that it is he, and alive, further, I swear to you by my head and honor that no finger shall be laid upon you till he is gone by, and that no pursuit of him shall be attempted. Now choose."

There was silence for awhile. Then Elissa spoke, in a broken voice:

"King Ithobal, I have chosen. Trusting in your honor, I will stand upon the rock, and when I have seen the Prince Azel go by in safety, then, since you desire it, you shall put your arms about me and bear me whither you will. You have conquered me, King Ithobal; henceforward I am yours and no other man's. Give the signal, I pray you, and I will come forth from the tomb."

Azel hung in his cage over the abyss of air, awaiting death and glad to die because he was sure Elissa had refused to purchase his life at the price of her own. By now the sun was high, while the eagles swept past him, making his prayer to heaven and waiting the end, till presently, from the opposite cliff, a beam of fire fell upon him. He closed his eyes, and he felt a warm thrice. Then, while he wondered what this might mean, the cage, in which he lay was drawn gently over the edge of the precipice and carried down the steep of the granite hill as it had been carried up them. At the foot of the hill the covering was taken from it, and he saw before him a caravan of camels, and seated on each camel one of his own comrades. But one camel had no rider, and Metem led it by a rope.

The servants of Ithobal took him from the cage and set him upon the camel, though they did not loosen the bonds about his wrists.

"This, Ithobal, command of the king," said the captain to Metem, "that the arms of the prince Azel should remain bound until you have traveled for six hours. Begone in safety, fearing no harm, and give the signal, if you please."

"What happens now, Metem?" asked Azel, as the camels strode forward, "and why am I set free who was expected to die? Has the man who sold me, or has the Lady Elissa, and he ceased."

"Upon the word of an honest merchant, I cannot tell you, prince. Yesterday as you were forced to give the message of King Ithobal to the Lady Elissa yonder in the tomb, and she would answer me only one thing; that if we could reach the principal city, and that you must have no fear of her, since she also had found a means of escape from Ithobal, and would certainly join us upon the road."

As Metem spoke, the camels passed round the hill on to the path that ran beneath the tomb of Baaltis, and there, standing upon the rock, some 60 feet above the level of the plain, he saw the king, and he saw the king's army, but at a distance, Ithobal, the king.

"Halt, Prince Azel," she called in a clear voice, "and answer to me far- away. I have bought your life and the lives of your companions and you are free, for the road is clear and nothing can overtake the 12 swiftest camels in Zimbabwe. Do not come to me, and forgetting no word that has passed my lips, for all my words are true, even to a certain promise which I made you lately by the mouth of Metem and which I now fulfill—that I would join you on your road less you should deem me faithless to the truth which I have often sworn to you. King Ithobal, this shape is yours, come now and take your prize. Prince Azel, my soul is yours, in life it shall accompany you and in death await you. Prince Azel, I come to you, and with one swift spring she hurled herself from the cliff edge to fall crushed upon the road beneath."

Azel saw and in his agony strained so nervously at the bonds which held him that they burst like rushes. Then he leaped from the camel and knelt beside her. She was not yet dead, for her eyes were open and her lips stirred.

"I have kept faith," she murmured, and her spirit passed.

Azel saw and in his agony strained so nervously at the bonds which held him that they burst like rushes. Then he leaped from the camel and knelt beside her. She was not yet dead, for her eyes were open and her lips stirred.

"That is my desire," said Azel. "A desire that cannot be fulfilled," answered Metem. "Come, prince, since we cannot go without you, and surely you do not wish to sacrifice the lives of all of us as an offering to the great spirit of the dead, who is dead, for it is one that she would not seek."

Then Azel knelt down and kissed the brow of the dead Elissa, and went his way.

That night when the darkness fell, the sky behind them grew red with fire.

"Behold, the end of the golden city," said Metem, "Issachar was a prophet indeed, who foretold that it should be so."

Azel bowed his head, remembering that Issachar had foretold this for Elissa and for him there was hope beyond the grave, and as he thought it a soft voice seemed to murmur in his ear:

"Be of good courage, beloved, there is hope."

And so he set his face toward the sea of life, and passed it, and long on, at his appointed hour, gained the further shore, to be welcomed there by her who watched for him.

And thus, because of the loves of Azel, the prince, and Elissa, the daughter of Sakon, 3,000 years ago, fell the ancient city of Zimbabwe at the hand of King Ithobal and his tribes, so that today there remains of it nothing but gray towers of stone, and beneath them the crumbling bones of men.

THE END.

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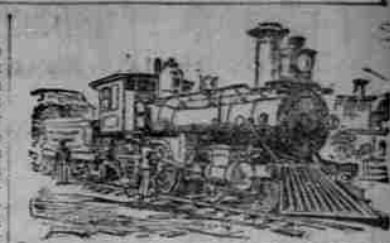
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